

March 24, 1973

Dear Lillian,

I wrote to Charles that I wasn't going to write any more to him about authenticity, although after his most recent letter I probably will, and I didn't say I wouldn't write to you and ~~give~~ him a carbon, which I will do if this letter turns out.

You and Wendy Martin both seem to have said to me that you ~~are~~ writing books on madness. The point I am making to Charles, extrapolated from Polanyi, that standards of the "authentic" have been applied more stringently to the beautiful, good and true than to the ugly, evil and thieving, applies also to sanity and madness. As one who has himself been much in love with madness, and has mistaken it for oracular powers, I was years ago delighted to read Freud's letter written after he met Salvador Dali, father of "paranoid" aesthetics: "I hate lunatics," Freud wrote; and that was obviously sane, and ~~not~~ for my infatuations, liberating. On the other side is the pattern in Doris Lessing's book of genius, The Four-Gated City, where some women who are "crazy" in the 1950's are by the 80's found to have extra-sensory powers, and if no extraordinary wisdom, then at least information about the future and about the content of other minds, and where once acting on such information made them seem crazy, eventually they (at least Martha Quest) were put on and proved most royal. At the same time some of the crazies seem just that, so that there is a problem of proof all over again--saint or devil? prophet or madman? Like the early Oedipus I would like unambiguous answers to these questions. Trilling is sound in the section on Marcuse when he questions the equation of insanity and authenticity, although he doesn't answer the implication that the "insane" behavior may be a logical response evoked by the society. I am not interested in the insane as victims, any more than I am in women as victims; I just don't find victimization convincing; I have been guilty of being glad at the crazy action of a friend because that action confirmed the theory of the person I was holding at the time, and in the maladroit tactics of marriage, probably provoked behavior to prove a theory to everyone concerned. So far Laing is right. But the other person can provoke that provocation, and had other strategies, and in some sense in such relations everyone seems to get what he wants although not to want it when he gets it.

Obviously in these questions I take an old-time rationalist ideal, and don't value or trust the derangement of all the senses. I hope you have thoughts on the ethics of madness. I wrote a catalogue for a show in Philadelphia in 1971 and left madness out in a list of variations on the theme of proving authenticity, but my argument might be suggestive. I use a distinction between the "good" as imposed, according to absolute transcendental authority, and "immanent," and argue that the recent (action painting) art is "painting in praise of immanence":

When the meaning of painting is immanent, the ethics of painting is immanence. This means that the good of a painting--its authentic realization--will be achieved along with the good of the artist--his self-discovery and self-revelation. Such immanence requires passion, freedom, spontaneity, and obedience of severe, self-set standards, rather than obedience of the rule of the academy, the market place, or the political bureau. . .

. . . . Meanwhile, the self fulfilling itself through painterly immanence runs into a problem of proof. How can the artist prove that he is ~~painting~~ obeying the inner and immanent, not the external and imposed, if he is painting good pictures? Immanence reaches the point at which the only way to be good--if that is to obey the laws of one's own nature--is to be bad: "The strength of immanent morality is proved by the violence of manifest immorality" (M. Polanyi, "Beyond Nihilism," Being and Knowing, p.17). Action painting had its violence: Jackson Pollock also known as Jack the Dripper. But there were also quiet annihilations, approaching ascetic self-annihilation, until the only way to prove one's purity as an artist would be to be Ad Reinhardt; or not to paint; or to die; or to declare painting dead. Or, in a comic proof of immanence, to annihilate immanence itself. . . ((I go on to Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, etc.))

Bloom's convolutions on influence are on this theme of immanence and authenticity; my point which I ~~can't~~ develop fully yet is that the source of the authentic must still be in transcendentals, that proving the good in literature is as difficult as Plato found it, and preferable to the popular sentimentality about evil.